Aristotle’s Account of Incidental Perception

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I. Introduction

Although there has been renewed interest in Aristotle’s theory of perception, not much attention has been paid to his treatment of perception of the incidental sense-objects. It is the primary purpose of this paper to draw a clearer account of his thought on this matter. Commentators on De Anima have usually believed that Aristotle does not hold that incidental perception is a case of pure aisthēsis but rather a complex sort of psychic functioning involving thought or memory or both, as well as perception. Moreover, whatever faculties are thought to contribute to incidental perception, it is generally believed that this process is the cognition (or recognition) of particular things or persons (viz. individual substances) alone. In addition, the general lack of interest in this topic has perhaps been responsible for the apparent further view – I assume this from silence on the matter – that incidental perception is not of central importance in Aristotle’s psychology. I shall dispute the first two of these positions. I believe it can be shown that Aristotle (1) does hold that incidental perception is a case of aisthēsis alone and (2) that possible incidental sense-objects include more than particular substances. But I shall conclude with the further claim that incidental perception is of no less importance than perception of special and common objects in Aristotle’s psychology and thought in general.

2 See below, p. 158 (with n. 8)-161.
3 See below, pp. 163 (with n. 19)-167.
4 Hamlyn is perhaps an exception to this. See below notes 23 and 27.
II. The Exemplary Cases

The passages in which Aristotle directs his attention to incidental perception are few. There are only three sections in *DA* where the expression occurs — 418 a 8 ff., 425 a 14 ff., and 428 b 18 ff. Elsewhere references to the incidentals are unnamed, usually indirect and brief, but I think there are more unnamed statements about them than is usually noted and that a rather large amount of information can be gathered.

The division of *aisthēta* is tripartite — special, common, incidental. The first two are sensibles per se or proper (κατὰ συμβεβηκός), so that we might assume a more basic bipartite division, proper and incidental (418 a 7-8). After naming the classes of special sensibles and their objects he says, “the sensible is meant incidentally in a case such as whether the white thing be the son of Diaces” (418 a 20-21). Elsewhere (425 a 24-26) his example is similar. Incidental perception takes place when we perceive “the son of Cleon — not because [the sense object is] the son of Cleon but because it is white, and to be the son of Cleon is incidental to this white.” Again he says (428 b 21-22) about incidental sensibles that “one cannot err [in perceiving] that it is white, but one can err as to whether the white is this or something else.” I shall refer to these as the exemplary cases.

One might be inclined to think that the incidence is not in the perception itself but only in that which has the qualities which are perceived. That is, one might believe that in the visual sensing of a white patch as such which happens to be a quality of the son of Cleon, one has incidental perception of the son of Cleon, merely because the white is incidental (συμβεβηκός) to the particular substance which is the son of Cleon. This state of affairs is, of course,

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5 'Incidental perception' translates ἄκληθενσον κατὰ συμβεβηκός, lit. 'to perceive incidentally' (*DA* 418 a 9). 'Incidental sensible' or 'sense-object' (αἰσθητὸν κατὰ συμβεβηκός) is also found (*DA* 418 a 20), but the expression αἰσθητὸς κατὰ συμβεβηκός is absent from the text. In this paper *DA* denotes *De Anima*, *PN Parva Naturalia*, *DS De Sensu*, *DM De Memoria*, *DI De Insomniis*.

6 Since it is the concept of the proper or per se (κατὰ ἄκληθα), rather than the subdivision of the proper into special (ἐπὶ) and common (κοινά), which is fundamentally antithetical to the incidental, I shall use the expression *proper* generally. Some commentators have used proper to refer to the special. To understand κατὰ συμβεβηκός as “indirectly” (as Ross, *Aristotle: De Anima*, Oxford, 1961, p. 268, and Block, “Aristotle and the Physical Object,” *passim*) is misleading and should be avoided. On these matters see Hamlyn, p. 105 on 418 a 7.